

Chapter XIX

Building Identity through Online Collaboration

Janice M. Krueger

Clarion University of Pennsylvania, USA

ABSTRACT

Distance education for professional programs in higher education changes as new technologies emerge. Online courseware offers a different medium for the delivery of distance courses previously offered through live or recorded television. The computer mediated communication features of online courseware provide an effective venue for peer and social learning to take place through collaborative inquiry, contributing to the building of knowledge and skills by all active participants. Students grow as a community of learners and, as common goals and priorities are emphasized, begin to view themselves and others in terms of this community, generating one cohesive group identity. This chapter explores how computer mediated communication (CMC) is seen as an effective tool for building the necessary knowledge, skills, disposition, and attitudes needed by candidates to discover their professional identity.

INTRODUCTION

Professional programs in higher education embrace many opportunities to reach students. Gone is the strict adherence to on campus only course offerings. As higher education grows in size and availability, the need for physical proximity to the institution is lessened with the availability of new technologies. New course delivery options are continually developing with technological advancements and distance education strengthens as a viable option for higher education to spread its wings.

In the recent past course content was delivered primarily through correspondence, live or recorded video via television, and interactive audio/video networks (Comeaux, 1995; Kozma, 1991; Wood, 2001). The communicative aspects of the Internet now encourage the development of on-line course work. Higher education has certainly become a key participant in this development and continues to offer numerous courses, programs, and degrees through Web-based delivery. One resulting challenge is course design that effectively uses the communication tools offered in courseware to engage students in collaborative learning

(Christopher, Thomas, & Tallent-Runnels, 2004; Fisher, Thompson, & Silverberg, 2005; LaRose & Whitten, 2000).

This chapter focuses on the computer mediated communication (CMC) capabilities of online courseware and how they have been used to foster and to increase collaborative learning among students, especially in higher education course work. This form of communication is seen as one way to apply basic theories and principles of peer and social learning often carried through in traditional classes and as a way to build a collective identity within a community of learners. The implication is that CMC offers the tools to further develop this identity within a professional community of learners by fostering the necessary disposition and attitudes of a given profession for competent practice. To benefit the reader, a brief overview of peer and social learning theory is presented first, followed by a discussion of how collaborative learning is implemented through the asynchronous interactive discussion forums of online courseware. The benefits and shortcomings of this medium are presented in addition to future areas of research and opportunities for the construction of knowledge and the development of a group identity for professional fields of study.

BACKGROUND

Peer learning occurs formally or informally in many ways and in different groups often categorized by age, grade level, or profession. It involves individuals working and learning together in pairs or teams with the more proficient members guiding the learning and skill development of others (Tudge, 1990). Collaborative learning among peers is also viewed as a viable teaching strategy. Across age groups, primary advantages were noted by increases in positive attitudes toward subject matter (Cohen, Kulick, & Kulick, 1982; Shibley & Zimmaro, 2002; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002), in problem solving abilities (Wentzel & Watkins,

2002), and in motivation (Chan, 2001; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). Implementation practices for this style of learning reflect various theories, particularly between Piaget (1975, 1977) and Vygotsky (1978). While both stressed active engagement in the learning process, Piaget viewed the peer's role as one which could create nonbalance and new equilibriums. He emphasized the peer's role as one who could introduce cognitive conflict by raising new questions (Palincsar, 1998; Tudge & Rogoff, 1989; Wink & Putney, 2002). He also valued peer discussions over those with someone more senior or at a different developmental stage (Palincsar, 1998; Tudge & Rogoff, 1989). Piaget further believed that development had to precede learning (Palincsar, 1998; Tudge & Rogoff, 1989; Wink & Putney, 2002).

Vygotsky (1978), on the other hand, believed knowledge was socially constructed by sharing expertise within the social and cultural setting. Vygotsky saw development as a complex, dialectical process combining external and internal factors characterized by developmental unevenness, qualitative transformation, and adaptive processes. He rejected linear development and incorporated historical and societal change in his conceptualization of development. His views differed from his contemporaries since his approach centered on psychology influenced by history and culture. He emphasized the interaction of changing social conditions with human behavior and stressed how humans are active participants, affecting their world and own behavior. Learning is socially facilitated by an experienced learner sharing his knowledge with a less advanced learner.

This mediated activity is accomplished through the use of tools, psychological and technical. Psychological tools include different signs and symbols, such as language and counting systems, and help individuals direct their behavior towards learning and achievement of goals, an internal orientation. Technical tools, though, are externally oriented to change the

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